

Pertussis (whooping cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious disease involving the respiratory tract. It is caused by a bacterium that is found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person. In New York State, the number of pertussis cases each year varies from an average of 300 cases to over 1,000 cases per year. The reasons for these increases are not entirely clear, but three- to five-year cycles of increased number of cases are known to occur.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Although most of the reported cases occur in children under five years, the number of cases in adolescents and adults is increasing.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is primarily spread by direct contact with discharges from the nose and throat of infected individuals. Frequently, older siblings who may be harboring the bacteria in their nose and throat can bring the disease home and infect an infant in the household.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. Initially, symptoms resemble those of a common cold, including sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough. Within two weeks, the cough becomes more severe and is characterized by episodes of numerous rapid coughs followed by a crowing or high pitched whoop. A thick, clear mucous may be discharged. These episodes may recur for one to two months, and are more frequent at night. Older people or partially immunized children generally have milder symptoms.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is usually five to 10 days but may be as long as 21 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread pertussis?

A person can transmit pertussis from onset of symptoms to three weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. The period of communicability is reduced to five days after antibiotic therapy is begun.

Does past infection with pertussis make a person immune?

One attack usually confers prolonged immunity.

What are the complications associated with pertussis?

Complications of pertussis may include pneumonia, middle ear infection, loss of appetite, dehydration, seizures, encephalopathy (disorders of the brain), apneic episodes (brief cessation of breathing) and death.

What is the vaccine for pertussis?

The vaccine for pertussis is usually given in combination with diphtheria and tetanus. Immunization authorities recommend that DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, acellular pertussis) vaccine be given at two, four, six and 15-18 months of age and between four and six years of age.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

The single most effective control measure is maintaining the highest possible level of immunization in the community. Treatment of cases with certain antibiotics such as erythromycin can shorten the contagious period. People who have or may have pertussis should stay away from young children and infants until properly treated. Treatment of people who are close contacts of pertussis cases is also an important part of prevention.